

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Listening Rooms: A qualitative method for better listening

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Abstract: This paper provides an overview of how Listening Rooms is being used in and by Higher Education Institutions to research and understand better participant experiences. Inspiration behind this approach will be provided, before a detailed discussion of how the method has been used extensively to enable stakeholders in education to gain insight into experiences that matter. The paper will then demonstrate how much participants have valued the method as a way of sharing experiences and of 'doing' research. Those attending will be introduced to the simple 'kit' required for undertaking Listening Rooms which will allow them to explore and adopt this methodology in their own institutional context.

Paper: *Introduction*

The HE sector demands of its institutions behaviour that focuses on continuous improvement, intensive self-reflection and constant comparison with competitors (BIS, 2016). Such behaviours result in league table positioning and reputational standing. Institutions need to be responsive and agile to change and to 'customer demand' if only for their business case if not for moral purpose. 'Student voice' and 'student experience' are key measures through which institutions base their approaches towards improvement, reflection and comparison yet how HEIs hear such information, and what they do with it, it is argued here, is limited because of the quality of the data. Freeman (2016) suggests that 'student voice' runs the risk of becoming too institutionalised and that we can too easily lose sight of the value of real student engagement in the process. How an institution becomes an effective change agent depends on the quality of the data; how much do students really get heard? Do we really understand what it is like to be a student? McLeod (2011:186) reminds us of the benefit of serious listening as student voice is '*... a reminder of the presence of embodied students, against the prevalence of the abstract*'. Institutions need to get much better at understanding those who experience university and get better and smarter at collecting and then using data for meaningful and impactful change.

Listening Rooms

Listening Rooms takes its roots from BBC Radio 4's *The Listening Project*[\[1\]](#) which itself derives inspiration from *StoryCorps*[\[2\]](#) in the USA. Both projects place front and centre the importance of 'everyday people' talking about 'everyday topics'. For both projects, conversations are undertaken by friendship / family pairings where discussion topics focus on things that matter to them both at that particular point in time. Crucially, the conversations draw on their own personal experiences.

Listening Rooms conversations between friends last for 60 minutes and are guided by six 10-minute prompt cards. The themes to these cards are broadly based around current topics of interest in student experience in higher education (Belonging, Becoming, Success, Happiness, Journey and Confidence). Conversations are recorded and undertaken alone with the researcher in a nearby room.

The purpose of the Listening Rooms method is to provide genuine opportunity for participants to share, reflect and explore their own experiences in a safe and private space and in so doing generate qualitative data that legitimises and exposes participant voice. The method allows participants to chart their own navigation through conversation, personal reflection and interaction from their fellow participant. The presence of a friend and the absence of a researcher create a safe private space. The method celebrates the importance and value of 'hard' listening between participants themselves in the conversation and by researchers analysing the data.

Using friendship between participants as the generator for research data is unusual. Exceptions include Skelton's (2001) use of female friendship groups to determine the research agenda and Bayley & Nacarrow's (1998) use of friendship conversations to determine customer behaviours. The adoption of a listening method based on friendship pairs in higher education seems to be unique (Heron, forthcoming).

Analysis of the data transcripts has been through a method created by a SHU colleague, Helen Parkin, called Round Table Analysis. Here, stakeholders with an interest in listening to these voices, come together having read several of the transcripts. All transcripts will have been read by at least two people and the stakeholders around the table reach consensus on the data. The two methods are complementary in philosophy (Parkin & Heron, 2019).

Application at Sheffield Hallam University and beyond

After an initial small-scale pilot, funded internally by the University's central teaching and learning directorate, the Listening Rooms method has been seen as having value for course teams as well as central directorates and external partners. Over the past two years, the idea of listening to student voices via Listening Rooms has gathered pace.

There have been 'commissions' by a large and varied selection of courses at Sheffield Hallam, ranging from health (examples: Nursing, Midwifery) through to Physics, English, Early Years and Sports Science: the method is applicable to any course and is not limited by the discipline area undertaken by the students. Impact that the Listening Rooms method has had at this level of teaching delivery as a result of staff listening to their own students in this way include: changes to approaches to induction with greater focus on inclusivity, and reinforcement about a particular pedagogical approach which was positively talked about in the student conversations, and which has now become

a regular feature. Listening Rooms work has also been undertaken at institutional level across particular student cohorts. Conversations with BAME students, for example, discussed by senior staff at the university with responsibility for Equality & Diversity, have generated interest by our Students Union and university in terms of BAME experiences and the need to improve in particular areas. Listening Rooms with LGBT+ students is of interest to the university in terms of its Stonewall application. We have one postgraduate student adopting the Listening Rooms method for her PhD looking at female BAME student experiences. Externally, the method has been used to understand better the current state of the teaching profession, asking teacher trainers and recently qualified teachers to talk about the sense of belonging to their profession (Heron & O'Brien, 2019), resulting in changes made to the teacher trainer 'offer' across South Yorkshire. It has also been used on children to understand their aspirations.

There are many commonalities of experience discussed with all students participating in the Listening Rooms, including a focus on the importance of personal relational experiences in journeying through a degree, friendship seen as crucial to a positive experience at university and a significant contributor to happiness and a recognised need for finding a work-life balance (although this was often not realised nor easy to achieve)

Participants are asked to describe and explain their experience of the method as a way of sharing their experiences when they have completed the hour's conversation. This information provides valuable data for the understanding of the method itself and has received overwhelmingly positive responses:

I thought this was an excellent way to do research because I was replaced and felt I could tell my honest opinion

It was helpful as it provided an insight into other people's views whilst also providing the opportunity to express in depth feelings

It was better than questionnaire because you can bounce ideas off one another

It was better than being alone or doing an individual interview with a researcher, as you feel at ease and can contribute to the conversation which is what happens in real life

In the past year, the university has invested in two Listening Rooms where conversations can take place. Staff are able to book these out or friendship pairs of students can book this unprompted through our virtual learning environment^[3].

From small beginnings, the project has now become a central part of the university's approach to student voice.

For discussion

Ways to enhance the method further - feeding back the voices to all students? Replicate the Radio 4 approach and 'broadcast'?

Other applications within and beyond the university setting

Inclusivity - language / disability / those without friends?

[1] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01cqx3b>

[2] <https://storycorps.org/>

[3] https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/achieve/listening-rooms/?doing_wp_cron=1561657386.8356430530548095703125